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SUBJECT: SLOVAK OFFICIALS PLAY DOWN H1N1 THREAT BUT CLOSE BORDER CROSSINGS WITH UKRAINE

REF: KYIV 1915

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Slovak officials have been playing down the threat of an H1N1 outbreak even as they close border crossings to Ukraine, where the situation has reportedly worsened in recent days. Confirmed H1N1 infections are still few--there were three additional cases reported this week in Bratislava--but our sources believe this number to be significantly underreported as many people are never tested. The Slovak government plans to sign a contract by the end of the month to purchase 1 million doses of H1N1 vaccine, but delivery will likely not take place before the end of January. Two small border crossings have been closed, and health monitors are posted at the crossings that remain open. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Slovak officials, including Minister of Health Richard Rasi, have repeatedly appeared in the media over the last few days to downplay public concern about H1N1. Rasi stated that there is "no reason for panic" in response to the flu outbreak in Ukraine (reftel) and proclaimed that the government is well-prepared for an eventual increase in cases, as it has stockpiled 27 million face masks. WHO Country Director Darina Sedlakova (protect) told us that while the current situation in Slovakia is stable, she is greatly concerned about the government's approach, which she characterized as being too casual. Sedlakova told us that GOS has shown no urgency in procuring H1N1 vaccines, instead drawing out its negotiations with pharmaceutical companies for three months, making it very likely that the vaccines will not arrive until long after infections have peaked. On the other hand, we have been told by health ministry officials that the Slovak government has provided some doctors to Ukraine, as well as a large number of face masks.

13. (U) Miroslava Vozaryova, Director of the International Treaties Department at the Ministry of Interior, told us that in response to the H1N1 outbreak in Ukraine, Slovakia has closed two of the five border crossings with its eastern neighbor. The ministry has dispatched doctors and specialized equipment to the remaining three crossings in order to identify and possibly refuse admittance to anyone with an elevated body temperature and H1N1 symptoms. Minister of Interior Robert Kalinak warned the public today that he is considering closing all but one border crossing, which would then be closely monitored by health officials.

EDDINS